

WAITRESS MOMS AND TECHNICIAN DADS

The Story Behind the 1998 Election Results

by Ruy Teixeira

Democrats awoke the day after the midterm elections to good news: contrary to virtually all predictions, they held their own in the Senate and the nation's governorships and actually picked up five seats in the House. Moreover, their gains in the House defied historical precedent: in this century, the average loss for the president's party six years into a president's tenure has been 38 seats. Even taking into account the Republicans' 52-seat pickup in 1994, the Democrats are still doing well over the course of the last two midterm elections: 47 seats lost versus the historical average of 62.

Yet despite holding their own and even making modest gains, the Democrats are still a weak party below the level of the presidency. With Tuesday's results, Democratic strength below the presidential level remains, with one exception, at its lowest ebb since the Great Depression and the advent of the New Deal (the lone exception: the 80th Congress of 1947-49). Just six years ago, when Bill Clinton gained the presidency in 1992, the Democrats controlled the House 258-176, the Senate 57-43, and the nation's governorships 30-18. After Tuesday's election, the Republicans control the House 223-211, the Senate 55-45, and the nation's governorships by a lopsided 31-17.

The events of Election Day 1998 may offer a way out for the Democrats. By focusing on economic issues important to voters with middle to low income and education levels – the new “waitress moms” and “technician dads” – the Democrats can easily build a coalition to produce congressional majorities.

The 1998 election and the new wedge issues

Until recently, the potent wedge issues of American politics were social. Republicans painted the Democrats as excessively tolerant on issues like crime and welfare and out of touch with the preferences of the average voter. Moreover, there was a perception that Democrats were tied in an unhealthy way to interest groups within their party that pushed this excessive liberalism.

Today, for a variety of reasons, those issues do not cut against the Democrats the way they used to, and in their place are a new a set of wedge issues that are basically economic. As a result, it is now fairly easy to tie the Republicans to business special interests that are on the wrong side of these economic wedge issues and fairly hard to tie the Democrats to constituency special interests promoting a liberal social agenda.

The data in **Table 1** illustrate the Democrats' huge advantage on these new wedge issues. By

TABLE 1
Which party can deal best with the issues?

Issue	Democrats	Republicans	Difference (Democrat – Republican)
Improving the health care system	57%	24%	+33
Right decision about Medicare	53	28	+25
Right decision about Social Security	52	29	+23
Improving education	51	30	+21
Understanding needs and problems of families	50	28	+22
Caring about people like you	46	25	+21
Leading the country into the 21st century	44	33	+11
Keeping the country prosperous	42	36	+6
Reducing taxes	40	40	0
Reducing crime	31	38	-7
Upholding traditional family values	31	47	-16
Candidates having more honesty and integrity	27	31	-4
High ethical standards	24	41	-17

Source: CBS/*New York Times* National Poll, October 26-28, 1998.

margins of 21-33 percentage points, voters prefer the Democrats on issues ranging from health care to Social Security to education. The exit polls confirm the political salience of these preferences (**Table 2**). Voters who selected health care as their key issue preferred Democrats 69% to 31%; those who selected education – the top issue – preferred Democrats 67% to 33%; and those who selected Social Security preferred Democrats by 59% to 41%. Reports from around the country suggest that it was indeed these issues that Democrats emphasized in their campaign commercials.

These results suggest that, despite the economic progress of the last several years, large numbers of voters are concerned about their health security, their retirement security, and their ability to get the right kind of education and training to adapt successfully to the new economy. Because Republicans seem callous and unresponsive to these concerns, the Democrats have a perfect wedge into the swing voters in the GOP camp.

But for these new wedge issues to be truly effective, the Democrats may have to draw sharper and clearer distinctions between themselves and the GOP. Right now, although the Democrats are on the voters’ side of these issues, the differences with the GOP are often small or confusing to voters. For example, both parties want to regulate health maintenance organizations, but the Democrats want individuals to be able to sue HMOs. Both parties want to “save” Social Security, but the Democrats want to reserve *all* the surplus for Social Security rather than just 90%. Both parties want to improve the educational system through structural reforms and tax breaks, but Democrats are also committed to some modest new spending initiatives.

As we shall see below, these modest differences, while breaking in the Democrats favor and helping them to mobilize their base, may not be enough to rebuild their congressional coalition among the “waitress moms” and “technician dads” who continue to find the Democrats an unconvincing option.

TABLE 2
Democratic support by issues that mattered most in House vote

Percent of voters selecting issue	Issue	Democratic support*
6%	Health care	69%
20	Education	67
14	Economy/jobs	65
12	Social Security	59
5	Clinton/Lewinsky matter	44
13	Taxes	29
18	Moral and ethical standards	16

* Based on two-party vote.

Source: 1998 VNS Exit Poll.

Waitress moms and technician dads: the hole in the Democratic electorate

In 1992, the Democrats received 54% of the two-party House vote. In 1998, they received just under 50%. Was this decline distributed uniformly across voter groups, or were Democrats particularly hurt by defection among specific voter groups?

As the data in **Table 3** indicate, Democratic decline between 1992 and 1998 has been concentrated almost exclusively among whites and, interestingly, Hispanics; black support has remained unchanged over this entire time period, although it rose sharply between 1996 and 1998.

The data on Democratic support by education also show evidence of differential decline. As **Table 3** and **Figure A** show, Democratic House support between 1992 and 1998 has dropped 9 points among those without a high school diploma, 7 points among those with a high school diploma, and 6 points among those with some college. In contrast, among those with a college degree¹ or postgraduate education, support dropped only a point. This pattern is replicated in the short term, with Democrats losing ground between 1996 and 1998 in all education categories below the level of college graduate.

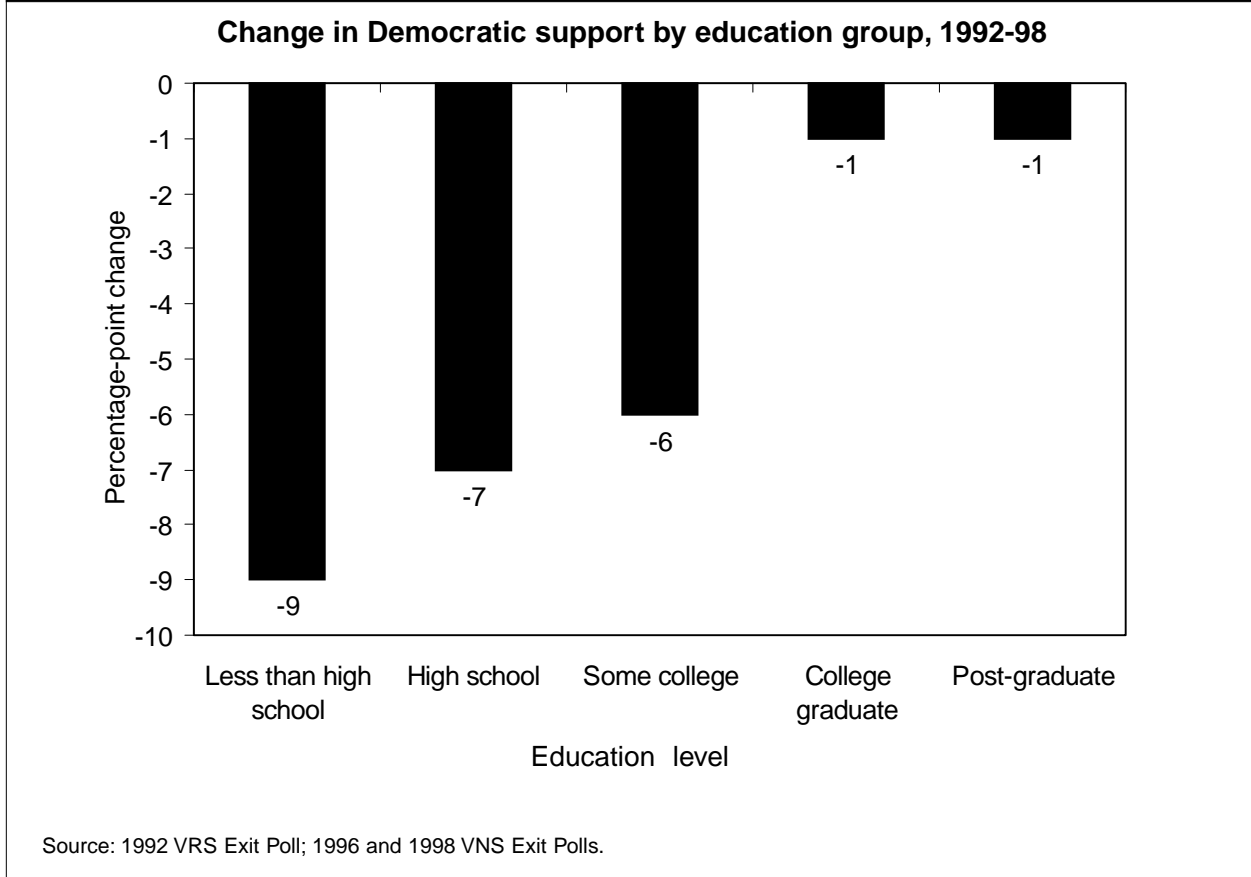
TABLE 3
Democratic support* for the House, 1992-98, by race, education, and income

	1992	1996	1998	Change 1996-98	Change 1992-98
Race					
White	50%	45%	43%	-2	-7
Black	89	82	89	+7	0
Hispanic	72	73	63	-10	-9
Education					
High school dropout	67%	65%	58%	-7	-9
High school graduate	58	55	51	-4	-7
Some college	53	50	47	-3	-6
College graduate	46	43	45	+2	-1
Post-graduate	55	51	54	+3	-1
Income					
Less than \$15,000	69%	63%	59%	-4	-10
\$15,000-29,999	57	56	55	-1	-2
\$30,000-49,999	52	50	49	-1	-3
\$50,000-74,999	49	47	45	-2	-4
\$75,000+	44	40	46	+6	+2
\$75,000-99,999	n.a.	43	48	+5	—
\$100,000+	n.a.	37	45	+8	—

* Based on two-party vote.

Source: VRS/VNS Exit Polls, 1992-98.

FIGURE A



Finally, the income data show a similar pattern between 1992 and 1998, with the Democrats losing support in all income categories below \$75,000 and slightly gaining ground with affluent voters above \$75,000. The data for 1996-98 are consistent with this pattern and show a particularly healthy increase in Democratic support among affluent voters.

Inspection of data for whites alone (not shown in table) confirms what these data imply. Overall support for the Democrats among whites has eroded severely, but that dropoff has been concentrated among those with less than a four-year college degree and those with low to moderate incomes. Indeed, in every instance, the decline in Democratic support among midscale to downscale whites has been greater than among midscale to downscale voters in the electorate as a whole.

Thus, the erosion in the Democratic congressional coalition can be located fairly precisely, in demographic terms, among the “waitress moms” and their partners, whom might be appropriately referred to as the “technician dads.” These voters have struggled economically for the last 25 years and, despite recent good times, remain unconvinced their future lies with the Democrats.

There has been much talk about waitress moms, but who are these technician dads? Are they big-city, blue-collar white men with little education – the “Archie Bunker” figures in old shows like *All in the Family*? Some of them may be, but the typical technician dad lives in the suburbs, does not work in an

industrial setting, and has at least a high school diploma – indeed may have some college or even an associate’s degree.

Technician dads and waitress moms are the real “suburban swing voters,” the ones the Democrats must reach to rebuild their congressional coalition. Yet it is the affluent suburban voters – those with \$75,000 or more in household income and usually holding college degrees, who are more typically mentioned as the target of choice by self-styled New Democrats, even though such voters are outnumbered 3-to-1 by their midscale to downscale counterparts who, despite recent improvements, are still only tepid Democratic supporters.

The justification for this peculiar emphasis seems to be that the suburbs are dominated by affluent voters and that, therefore, competing in the suburbs comes down to reaching affluent voters. Nothing could be further from the truth. The typical suburban voter is likely to have a moderate income between \$30,000 and \$75,000 and to be non-college-educated. The fact that these voters are volatile and difficult to reach does not seem to justify an emphasis on a relatively small upscale group whose comfort level pulls the Democrats away from the majoritarian economic issues on which they currently enjoy such an advantage.

Conclusion

The Democrats face a choice. They can either concentrate on building a new base among college-educated affluent voters who want to be protected from the Republican extreme right but who are lukewarm on the economic issues that constitute the Democrats’ real comparative advantage, or they can concentrate on rebuilding their support among the waitress moms and technician dads who find current Democratic initiatives insufficient to win their loyalty.

If the Democrats choose the first course, it seems likely that they will have to rely on continuous mobilization of their union and minority base simply to break even in congressional elections: the numbers aren’t there to develop a majority coalition.

However, if the Democrats can rebuild their strength among waitress moms and technician dads, and join that strength to their current union and minority base, a natural Democratic majority can easily emerge. While there are risks in developing the large-scale economic wedge issues that would pry these voters away from the Republicans, the Democrats have a big issue advantage on which to build.

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Endnote

1. Mostly those with a four-year college degree, although, due to ambiguous wording in VNS questions, this category contains an undetermined number of individuals with two-year associate’s degrees.